

OUTDOOR HEALTH AND SAFETY TIPS

Fall is on its way and with it, hunting season. Thousands of Texas hunters will take to the woods and fields to hunt deer, doves and other animals, and they won't be alone. Millions of critters that can carry diseases will be out there too, according to the Texas Department of Health (TDH).

Hunters, campers and hikers should be aware that they can be exposed to diseases transmitted by ticks, fleas and mosquitos, many of which begin with flu-like symptoms such as fever, chills, headache and body aches. However, symptoms can progress in severity and affect various systems of the body. For instance, in Lyme disease, which is the most frequently diagnosed tick-borne problem in the U.S., there may be skin lesions or rashes plus, if left untreated, severe damage to the joints, heart and nervous system. Both Rocky Mountain spotted fever and human ehrlichiosis can create a measles-like rash and can be fatal if not treated quickly. Exposure to the bacteria that causes tularemia, yet another tick-borne disease, can also occur by handling carcasses of wild rabbits.

Plague, common in wild rodent populations of West Texas, is transmitted to people by fleas or by direct contact with infected animals such as prairie dogs, squirrels, cats, rats and mice. This dreaded disease can include the presence of painful, swollen lymph nodes. Unless adequate medical treatment is sought quickly, death may result.

Encephalitis is an infection of the central nervous system that may be caused by one of several mosquito-borne viruses. Those who have more severe forms of the disease may have intense headache, high fever, nausea, muscle tenderness, partial or nearly complete unconsciousness and even coma.

The best way to avoid getting these diseases is to protect yourself from insect bites:

- CUse insect repellent containing DEET or permethrin (follow package directions).

- CStay on trails outdoors and avoid areas of overgrown brush and tall grasses.

- CWear protective clothing such as a hat, long-sleeved shirt and long pants tucked into boots or socks. Wear light-colored clothes to easily spot ticks.

- C If you're in an area with ticks, check your body carefully for them every few hours. Ticks are small, easy to miss and will attach to any part of the body from head to toe, so look carefully.

Hantavirus infection is spread to people by infected rodents such as rats and mice. A

rodent may have the virus in its droppings, urine and saliva; from here, the virus can spread in the air on dust particles. "You can become infected by inhaling dust that contains the virus," said Bradley Hicks, a wildlife biologist with TDH's Zoonosis Control Division. "Cleaning cabins, sheds or barns without a mask and having outdoor hobbies such as camping, hiking or hunting can increase your chances of coming in contact with hantavirus." As with all the diseases mentioned previously, early symptoms are much like those of flu. The disease may lead to extreme difficulty with breathing, possibly followed by death. Patients may receive relief through supportive treatment, but antibiotics will not cure a hantavirus infection.

Deer hunters need to be aware that deer can share the bacterium that causes anthrax in people. Likewise, feral hogs can carry brucellosis. Care should be taken when handling wild animal carcasses, including wearing latex gloves when field dressing those animals.

Rabies is another deadly disease shared by animals and humans. Rabies is a viral infection of the nervous system that may affect almost any warm-blooded animal. "It is impossible to tell by looking at an animal whether it is infected with rabies, so avoid contact with any wild animals. Especially do not try to assist injured animals or touch dead ones," warns Guy Moore, a TDH wildlife biologist. "If you need assistance, contact a game warden, a park employee, or an animal control or law enforcement officer." This disease is present in many wild animal populations in Texas, especially skunks, bats, raccoons, coyotes and foxes. Humans usually are infected through a bite by a rabid animal, which is why you should consult with a physician if you are bitten by any animal.

Remember to be safe while enjoying the out-of-doors!

For more information, visit the TDH Zoonosis Web site at <http://www.tdh.state.tx.us/zoonosis>.

(For more information, contact Guy Moore, wildlife biologist, TDH Zoonosis Control Division, at 512-458-7255, or Shari Perrotta, TDH Communications Office, at 512-458-7400.)